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Glowing Glass Islands, Invisible Musicians and the Brave New World Accommodation and Critique in the Age of Access

Posted on **June 1, 2002** by **Editor**



By **Marc Marenco** <marencom@pacificu.edu>

The Washington D.C. Grand Hyatt is an impressive hotel. Mark Bailey and I stayed there while presenting a program for the American Association of Universities and Colleges predicting the impact of ICT in higher education. All the rooms faced inward toward a central plaza designed along tropical themes; a meandering central pool of softly glowing blue water with fountains and tropical plants. The restaurants and lobby were nestled in amongst the curvatures of this pool. Readers who travel regularly have most likely seen variations on the theme... However, this sultry hotelscape had one very unusual feature. Out in this dreamy blue pool there sat a piano, an exquisite full sized grand piano. It sat on a circular island of glass which glowed varying soft hues of green, blue, and red. It was a stunning sight, the first thing one really notices coming into the hotel. One is constantly reminded of this piano because it is being played all the time, big beautiful passionate stuff blending perfectly with the sound of falling water. A nice touch. But there was something eerie about this piano on the island. The musician playing it was invisible. The pleated leather stool was tucked up in just the right position under the keyboard, and the keys were played with great panache and feeling. But the person playing it was nowhere to be seen. If I looked very hard I swear I could see the seat moving up and down with the slight pressure of an invisible behind.

In The Age of Access, Jeremy Rifkin writes eloquently about the commoditization of culture and life experience. The central thesis of his book is that property relations are changing in a fundamental way. What counts now is not what you own but what you can access. For example, more and more people are leasing rather than purchasing automobiles. What one pays for is not "a car" but access to personal transportation. ICT is drastically accelerating the trend away from property to access as the defining characteristic of personal freedom. According to

Rifkin, through the permeation of our lives with the media through which we encounter and engage the world (tv, radio, ICT in general), we are slowly coming to accept the thesis that access to cultural experiences (what he calls the “third sector”) can be and eventually must be bought. Running out of physical property and material products to sell, future companies will patent and sell immaterial products, access to experience. The problem is that certain kinds of experiences cannot be bought and sold without essentially altering their nature. Culture cannot be bought and sold because to do so removes two essential communal binding agents from its essence: social trust and empathy. The contention is that ICT, as it is currently evolving, is contributing to the destruction of what makes a society possible; namely this same social trust and empathy. I thought of Rifkin as I tried and tried to make the very talented pianist in the hotel lobby materialize. Everything was there, the beautiful well played piano, a dreamily beautiful setting, the social context (or the simulation of one); everything was there... except the person. My relation to the music in that moment was altered. Had it been a CD or radio playing it would not have had this impact on me. But it was the pretense, the attempt to meld the simulated and the real that was so disturbing. Perhaps in the future we can holographically place someone on the piano stool and watch him or her tickle the ivories. I wonder if that would have helped... What started out as a pleasant invitation to a promising aesthetic encounter became a kind of David Lynch film I could never quite escape; a mixture of the familiar with the alien, the aesthetic with the grotesque, the human with the machine. Every conversation, every moment in which one read, shared a meal or just sat and thought was diffused with the sound of this piano on its glowing glass island.

In my last Berglund article, *Ubiquity and Opacity*, I remarked that my relation to ICT is an odd one, simultaneously filled with excitement and foreboding. On the one hand I am clearly amongst those educators who have adapted to ICT and regularly experiment with its use in many different contexts. My handheld device is always with me. In addition to the normal organizational software it contains a number of philosophical texts, a novel by Dostoevsky, and all student papers so far submitted in the class I’m teaching this summer. On the other hand my family does not own a television set nor are we ever likely to own one. I know only two other families in our area who have chosen to completely exclude television from their lives. A researcher on the social impact of television at Oregon State University, Larry Rosenkoetter, told me that statistically an American is more likely to be without indoor plumbing than be without a television set. I’m convinced that if most people could get through the first three months of living without a television they would begin to be aware of a deep sense of relief — good “educational” programming notwithstanding. In the article I wrote last December I went so far as to say that I tend to agree with most of what Neil Postman has had to say about television and ICT in his books “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” “Technopoly,” and his lecture, “Informing Ourselves to Death.” His message is roughly this — We are drowning in entertainment and information. We have largely lost the capacity for complex reasoning and serious public discourse. We are rapidly losing the capacity to sustain a conversation or even a single thought long enough to derive any insight which can be brought forward and acted on in the future. He argues that we have been intellectually, morally and spiritually incapacitated by a “brave new world” which levels everything in our culture through a technopoly which we can no longer meaningfully critique. Here is a

simple example:

Scenario. You are sitting in a hotel café in San Francisco. There is piped in music... Phil Collins... "You're the only one who ever knew me at all..." Beside you sits the complimentary copy of USA Today. Headline – "Relatives: Jet Tape confirms heroism." A voyeuristic short piece describing the screams and rushing wind as the plane hits the ground. Great stuff. Whoops, my coffee is a little cold, "waiter?" And just above this headline is the important news that "prom gowns let it show" this year. A faceless bare midriff invites you to turn to page 1 D (after you've glanced at the juicy bits from the doomed jet tape) to get the full story. Hmmm, this is not a bad omelet... fresh mushrooms... cheddar cheese... In the left hand column are the "Newline" items: "Robert Blake arrested for possibly killing his wife" and "Derailment kills at least 6 in Florida." And the cover story for this nationally distributed newspaper dated April 19th 2002? "The Osbournes find a home in America's living rooms," an important account of the private life of Ozzie Osbourne, heavy metal man extraordinaire. All part of the café experience — "you're the only one who ever knew me at all..." And so we dream our way through life.

Our students. What do we find there? Despite the fact that our students are more technocompetent and technoexpectant than ever, take a look at the Higher Education Research Institute's survey of entering freshmen for 2001 . In record numbers these students report:

- Feeling frequently bored with school – 41% (Of course, we blame the teachers for this rather than our entertainment oriented culture.)
- Frequently being tardy to class – 65.1%
- Absent from class – 35.6% (19.6% In 1968)
- Feeling physically and emotionally unhealthy (6.6 % already anticipate that they will seek psychological counseling in college – 3.5 % in 1989)
- Doing less homework (34.9% report doing 6 hours or more during the week, down from 47% in 1987)

And here is the real kicker...

- Higher grades... 44.1% report an 'A' average in high school. (Compared to 17.6% in 1968)

There are many complex reasons for these startling statistics. But I tend to agree with Postman and others who see these figures as reflecting, at least in part, a being overwhelmed with entertainment saturated developmental milieu's and a continual bombardment of endless, useless, unintegrated facts; what Brown and Duguid calls "information" in contrast to "knowledge." It is a cliché, but a true one, that the "medium is the message" and we are absorbing the media of ICT into our bones without, in my view, critique and analysis commensurate with the seriousness of the enterprise. I am not here arguing for the elimination of ICT in higher education. But it is amazing to me how rapidly this question of the reduction or elimination of ICT has become un-askable. It is all simply there like the air somehow and one is

only chided or smiled at in pointing that out in a serious tone of voice.

Hubert Dreyfus writes, "... not only are we transformed by the way we use our tools, we are not aware of how we are being transformed, so we need all the more to try to make explicit what the Net is doing for us and what it is doing to us in the process." What I am looking for, what I am committed to, is a robust, open, sustained conversation about the psychological, social, economic, educational, moral and spiritual impact of ICT that is just as robust as the evangelical fervor with which ICT is being embraced in our schools and homes. THAT, it seems to me, is what education is all about – not only teaching our students to ADAPT to the world they are being thrust into but developing a strong personal and social centering that is able to imagine change and act on that imagination. As a starting place for this conversation I suggest reading from the following three locations:

1. Here are a set of quotes from recent media sources on ICT in higher education. Mark Bailey and I used these at the AAC&U conference in January 2002:

<http://pacinst.pacificu.edu/murdock/resources/A%20Few%20Pithy%20Quotes%20for%20Discussion.doc>

2. Here is a set of quotes from Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*:

<http://pacinst.pacificu.edu/murdock/resources/Amusing%20Ourselves%20Quotes.doc>

3. And finally, a set of quotes from Postman's *Technopoly*:

<http://pacinst.pacificu.edu/murdock/resources/Technopoly.doc>

In addition I have two more suggestions. I offer here a set of principles to guide the decision making about ICT in higher education.

- Resist the Wizard of Oz syndrome. It might make sense to climb a mountain "because its there..." but it does not make sense to use ICT simply because it is there.
 - Ask how ICT serves the mission of your institution. Continually ask what purpose the adoption of a particular technology serves.
 - Do research on what the actual impact of technology will have on learning and campus culture. Do the benefits outweigh the risks? The Neil Postman questions are very real and very serious. We may not go down his path but we must take seriously the Ethics, Law and Social Implications (ELSI) questions.
 - Create an active technology policy review board. Do not leave the evolution of technology to IT departments and administrators. Also, do not limit discussion to technical issues and budget concerns. Ask the question, "is there a healthy on-going discussion of the ELSI questions in our institution?"
 - Build technocritique into the existing curriculum. Most colleges and universities have some sort of first year seminar program. Building technocritique into that program could be a very good way of setting the tone early on that your institution is not only ICT ready but ICT

critical.

- Become involved in ICT public policy development. Like genetics ICT is a rapidly evolving technology that is out pacing our ability to think about it... Public education interventions and spirited public policy discussions are sorely needed and conspicuously absent. Find ways for you and your institution to get involved in public policy issues.
- Join a concerned ELSI forum on ICT.

Which brings me to my final set of remarks. The Berglund Institute is committed to “Internet Studies.” We are not only interested in technological innovation. We are interested in the ethical, legal and social impact questions raised by the internet and related technologies. Toward the advancement of an ongoing online conversation of the ELSI questions we are developing a forum which will focus on specific issues and questions that have a values/social impact dimension. I will be writing a series of articles on specific issues which readers can respond to through our forum. The first article in this series will be on access to internet content in libraries. As you know, on May 31st, 2002 the U.S. District court of Eastern Pennsylvania published its opinion on *Multnomah County Public Library, et. al. vs United States of America, et. al.* The court ruled that CIPA (Children’s Internet Protection Act) is in violation of the First Amendment. What will the social/moral/cultural/educational impacts of this decision be? Should there be unrestricted access to the internet in public libraries? In the libraries of private institutions like Pacific University? If you think the answer to the question is a simple one... join me in the discussion of this issue next fall and we’ll see where we go.

Footnotes Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Age of Access* (Putnam, 2000). The subject of this article is not television though I commend Jerry Mander’s, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Quill, 1977) and Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985) to the interested reader. <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html>

Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* writes, “‘Sesame Street’ does not encourage children to love school or anything about school. It encourages them to love television.” Provocative overstatement? Yes. Is there a truth somewhere in there? Yes. (pg. 144)

By the way, oversleeping has been overtaken by surfing the net as the number one reason for procrastination in doing homework and writing papers.

Hubert Dreyfus. *On the Internet: Thinking in Action* (Routledge Press, 2001). For an excellent overview from someone unconvinced that ICT helps students do this see Todd Oppenheimer, *The Computer Delusion* in “*The Atlantic Monthly*” (July 1997).

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14 THOUGHTS ON “GLOWING GLASS ISLANDS, INVISIBLE MUSICIANS AND THE BRAVE NEW WORLD

ACCOMMODATION AND CRITIQUE IN THE AGE OF ACCESS"

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on **February 2, 2014 at 7:45 PM** said:

This design is spectacular! You most certainly know how to keep a reader entertained. Between your wit and your videos, I was almost moved to start my own blog (well, almost...HaHa!) Excellent job. I really enjoyed what you had to say, and more than that, how you presented it. Too cool!

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on **February 3, 2014 at 9:33 PM** said:

What's up to every body, it's my first go to see of this webpage; this blog contains awesome and actually excellent data for visitors.

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on **February 3, 2014 at 11:31 PM** said:

Hey I know this is off topic but I was wondering if you knew of any widgets I could add to my blog that automatically tweet my newest twitter updates. I've been looking for a plug-in like this for quite some time and was hoping maybe you would have some experience with something like this. Please let me know if you run into anything.

I truly enjoy reading your blog and I look forward to your new updates.

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on **February 4, 2014 at 2:41 AM** said:

I've been browsing online more than three hours today, yet I never found any interesting article like yours. It is pretty worth enough for me.

In my view, if all website owners and bloggers made good content as you did, the internet will be a lot more useful than ever before.

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on **February 4, 2014 at 2:54 AM** said:

Heya i am for the primary time here. I found this board and I find It truly useful & it helped me out a lot.

I'm hoping to provide one thing back and help others like you aided me.

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on **February 4, 2014 at 4:59 AM** said:

Hi! I'm at work surfing around your blog from my new iphone!
Just wanted to say I love reading through your blog and look forward to all your posts! Keep up the fantastic work!

band saw reviews

on **February 4, 2014 at 5:04 AM** said:

Thanks for sharing your thoughts about equity loan interest.

Regards

best vacuum sealer

on **February 4, 2014 at 7:56 PM** said:

I know this web site offers quality depending articles and extra material, is there any other web site which gives these kinds of stuff in quality?

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on **February 4, 2014 at 8:54 PM** said:

Attractive component to content. I simply stumbled upon your web site and in accession capital to say that I acquire in fact loved account your weblog posts. Any way I'll be subscribing for your augment and even I achievement you get right of entry to consistently fast.

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on **February 4, 2014 at 11:50 PM** said:

Howdy! I know this is somewhat off topic but I was wondering if you knew where I could locate a captcha plugin for my comment form? I'm using the same blog platform as yours and I'm having difficulty finding one? Thanks a lot!